

Muscle Tension Dysphonia

This is the most common diagnosis in Voice Clinics, with up to 40% of patients diagnosed with this.

What are the symptoms?

These can be any or several of the following:

- Voice quality breathy, husky, or hoarse.
- Unable to project speaking voice over background noise.
- Voice tires easily.
- Loss of pitch range in singing voice.
- Speaking voice feels higher in pitch.
- Speaking voice feels lower in pitch.
- Strained or tight voice.
- Weak or airy voice.
- Soreness or aching in the throat.
- Soreness or aching in the front of the neck.
- Sense of increased mucous, wanting to clear throat more often.



What is causing these symptoms?

Muscle Tension Dysphonia (MTD) is an imbalance in muscle use in and around the larynx. This builds up as muscular tension, and leads to an inefficient system that may feel like a struggle.

In Primary MTD, the cause can be:

- Change of voice use, increased vocal loading.
- Change of voice use after an upper respiratory tract infection.
- Emotional stress or anxiety.
- Irritants – allergies, reflux, passive smoking.
- A combination of the above.

In Secondary MTD the underlying cause is a vocal pathology, the MTD is the result of trying to work around this. It is a compensatory adjustment.

The only way to reliably tell the difference between Primary and Secondary MTD is to have a nasendoscopic assessment in a voice clinic. If there is no visible pathology of the vocal folds, then the muscle tension is functional.

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What does 'functional' mean?

Functional voice disorders are changes to the voice without an obvious anatomical or physiological cause. Instead, they are the result of an uncoordinated voice system. The muscles in and around the larynx are either over-working or under-working. The ones that are over-working will be causing strain and fatigue.

Why does stress or anxiety contribute to these physical changes?

When we are anxious, our autonomic nervous system is spending more time in the Sympathetic state. This is our 'fight or flight' response, alerting our body to danger and preparing it for action. Our muscles are primed for a response, and are held to some extent. If we are slightly anxious, in a continual state of low-level worry, then our muscles will be slightly held for more of the time. As they are holding, their function is less efficient. This builds over time in systems that are either sensitive to emotional change, or systems that we are using a lot. If you are a professional voice user, it's your voice that will show the signs of strain.



The 'Guarded Larynx'

There may be a time when you are worried about your voice, perhaps concerned about injuring or causing harm to your voice. Paradoxically, this desire to protect your voice can lead to holding patterns, or guarding. This will affect the ease and balance of your voice use and can be a contributing factor in MTD.

What happens next?

If you are troubled by your voice symptoms, book an appointment with your doctor to get a referral to a voice clinic. If you are diagnosed with MTD you will probably be offered **speech therapy**. This will help you to relearn the habits and patterns of use that have contributed to the problem. If you are waiting for an ENT appointment, therapy is useful in the meantime to help you to manage your vocal habits.

If you are a professional voice user, you may want to work with a **Singing Voice Rehabilitation Specialist**.

Manual therapy such as gentle vocal massage can be useful to reset your vocal system and relieve some of the symptoms.

If you suspect that anxiety is part of the cause, you may find that **counselling or psychotherapy** is a helpful path for you.